

Whitehall in cover-up on tainted blood risk

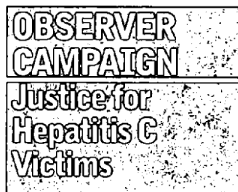
by Antony Barnett
Public Affairs Editor

THOUSANDS of people have been infected with a lethal virus following blunders by the Department of Health in the Eighties which led to one of 'the gravest disasters in

the history of the NHS'. *The Observer* has obtained secret Whitehall documents showing successive governments failed to stop the scandal, involving thousands of patients being given blood products contaminated with the hepatitis C virus, which can lead to chronic liver disease and cancer.

The disclosure follows our revelation two weeks ago that more than 110 haemophiliacs have died of hepatitis C after being given Factor 8, a product designed to help their blood to clot.

Some 1,200 haemophiliacs



who contracted HIV through Factor 8 have benefited from an £80-million-plus compensation package, but those who died or are dying from hepatitis C have not received a penny. Tomorrow the Haemophilia Society begins a

week of action demanding justice for them.

Successive governments have argued that there was no evidence of negligence by the state. But *The Observer* has seen evidence to suggest otherwise. Had the Department of Health listened to medical advice, hundreds of lives might have been saved and thousands more would not have been put at risk.

It was well known by the mid-Seventies that Factor 8 carried a high risk of hepatitis contamination. The UK's blood service was so under-resourced that it had to rely

heavily on imported Factor 8 from the US. Much of this came from junkies and drunks who were paid for their blood. It later emerged that British-made Factor 8 was equally contaminated because it was made from such large pools of British donors.

The Department of Health argued that at the time hepatitis C was thought to be such a mild disorder that benefits of Factor 8 outweighed risks. But as early as 1978 it was warned of the severity of hepatitis C.

Professor Eric Preston, a

leading UK haemophilia expert, advised it was safer to give those suffering from mild haemophilia a synthetic product called DDAVP.

More than a third of haemophiliacs suffer so mildly that, were they warned of the Factor 8 risks, they would probably have had alternative treatment.

Preston told *The Observer*: 'The argument has always been that the hepatitis risk was a "small price to pay". But in 1978 we showed quite definitely that non-A, non-B was a very serious disorder. The Department of Health

should have responded by pushing for ways to inactivate the virus in the blood, or given patients the choice of an alternative.'

Lawyers acting for victims believe that the hepatitis C disaster was exacerbated by the way the Department of Health starved the UK's Blood Products Laboratory of money, allowing it to fall into 'severe neglect'.

In May 1979 Dr Richard Lane, director of the Blood Products Laboratory, wrote a confidential letter to a senior DHSS civil servant warning of the dangers. He said: 'A

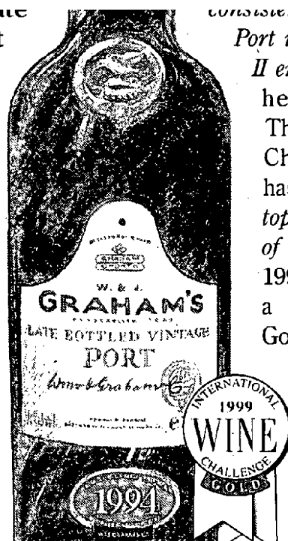
major disaster now linked to this laboratory would have such far-reaching consequences for BPL and in particular for myself that they do not bear thinking about.'

In 1980 senior civil servants warned Ministers of the problems. An eight-page classified report seen by *The Observer* makes it clear that the 'risk of transmitting hepatitis' from imported Factor 8 was known.

Despite such blunt warnings it took at least a further five years for hepatitis-free blood to be given to British haemophiliacs.

for that extra special Late

Bottled Vintage Port, it is not a bad policy to pay serious attention to the opinions of some of the experts in the field. Writing of **Graham's**, *James Suckling* of the *Wine Spectator* has observed, "The consistently outstanding quality of its Vintage Ports illustrates a passion for making great Port." And the respected authority *Robert Parker* remarked "**Graham's**



consistent producer of great

Port in the post World War II era." In blind tastings held each year by The International Wine Challenge, **Graham's** has repeatedly won more top awards than any of its competitors. Since 1993 **Graham's** has won a record total of 12 Gold Medals for its Ports including, this year, a Gold for the 1994 LBV. "I'll go for **Graham's**", you'll say: "It's unbeatable".

further evidence to conclusively prove Archer's guilt.

A series of telephone calls between Francis and Archer this month were recorded. In the first, on 4 November, Francis confides to Archer he fears that the story that he

Archer: Do you think he has a copy of that?

Francis: I don't know

Archer: Yeah, well don't ever let him see it.

Later in the same conversation, Francis reminisces

Francis: So you were covering?

Archer: Yes ... What happened was this. They [the *Daily Star*] got the wrong day. So I was having dinner in that restaurant that night on the day they thought ... It was

You were never mentioned or referred to in the trial or any papers connected with it. Two: I never made a statement about you because by the time your letter had come they had changed the date, so you became an irrelevance.

Archer asked friend to lie

Fact and fiction

Continued from page 1

accused by a newspaper of having slept with prostitute Monica Coghlan. That accusation was false and, in the libel action ... I was fully vindicated and awarded £500,000 in damages which I donated to charity.' He is understood to have been having dinner with ex-personal assistant Andrina Colquhoun.

Francis wrote a letter to

planned TV series. The Francis alibi was never used in court because the *Star* then claimed Archer was with the prostitute on 8 September. Archer produced another alibi to explain his movements on 8 September: dinner with his agent Terence Baker.

Archer said yesterday he was saddened Francis decided 'to profit by selling his story' to the *News of the*

made it quite clear that I had made mistakes in my life, and asked to be selected on the basis of having worked hard to develop new ideas to improve life in the capital. Again, I repeat, I have made errors, some serious, some trivial. I have always hoped that my good points outweighed my bad,' Archer said. 'However, although I would like to be mayor of

The claim Archer said he had attended Sandhurst military academy and spent two years at the University of California. The reality Sandhurst has been